

# **EXHIBIT V**

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All the edits are here and Chapter 59. I took of Chaper 60 and am finishing it up. Will send separately as soon as I am done.

Tracy

## Chapter 53

“So umm...how did last night go with Hudson?” Macy asks as we pack up some things to take to Giant City with us early the next morning. “You know, if you want to help your cousin live vicariously and all.”

I grab a shirt and fold it, placing it into my backpack. “Nothing happened. We watched a movie.”

“Above or below the sheets?” She winks at me and I snort-laugh.

“On the *couch*,” I clarify. Although my cheeks heat as I remember how he tucked me snug against his side, his large hand covering mine whereas it rested against his muscled thigh. True to his word, he didn’t make a single move on me all night.

Well, until the end when we got into a fight about why Princess Leia couldn’t admit she loved Han Solo until it was too late. One minute we were just casually hanging out and the next—we were sniping at each other over a fictional character. One minute, we were perfectly fine hanging out as friends—and the next ~~we wanted to rip each other’s clothes off and act like animals; all I could think about was ripping his clothes off and climbing with him into those oh-so-sexy sheets.~~

~~Hudson and my bickering has always been challenging and dare I say, fun. But now I see it for what it really is—foreplay.~~

Instead, I made an excuse and hustled back to my room as fast as I could, his last taunt still echoing in my ears.

I’ll be here when you change your mind.

If I change my mind, I shot back.

And he laughed. He actually laughed. The jerk.

I didn’t run because I was scared, or at least, not just because I was scared.

~~I ran because it had suddenly occurred to me that Hudson's and my bickering—while always challenging and usually fun—was also something else entirely. Foreplay. And if the heat in our arguments is any indication, I'm a little afraid of what we'll burn down if we actually get together. Coward.~~

~~Or maybe the better question is, what won't we burn down?~~

~~Hudson and my bickering has always been challenging and dare I say, fun. But now I see it for what it really is—foreplay. I don't know if I'm ready for that, don't know if I'm ready for any of this.~~

"You look exhausted," Macy says in a deliberately upbeat voice.

Yeah, well that happens when you spend the night tossing and turning over ~~something your boyfriend said that may or may not be true about your relationship issues.~~

"Hudson just said something I didn't like at the end of the evening." I cross to my closet and reach for my black coat because it matches my mood.

But Macy is right there, taking it out of my hand and putting it right back in the closet. "No brooding," she tells me. "I'm totally in that boy's corner...until he hurts you. Just say the word, and I'll help bury the body."

"Nah, it wasn't that bad. I'm not brooding." It's a blatant ~~lie~~, but apparently I'm doing a lot of that today, so what's one more?

"Oh, right. Is stewing better? Languishing? What verb would you like?"

"Ruminating," I tell her as I crack up, because it's impossible to be sad around Macy for long. Even when she's still a little sad herself. "I'm *ruminating* over the state of my affairs."

"Oh, well, ruminate away. But do it in your favorite color." She takes my hot pink coat off the hanger and hands it to me. "It'll make you feel better."

I look from her to the coat as it occurs to me that now would be a perfect time to tell her that hot pink is very definitely not my favorite color. But she's smiling for the first time in quite a while, the prospect of this trip away from school making her happy in a way she hasn't been since Xavier. Telling her I don't like pink would be like kicking a puppy just to hear it cry. I can't do it.

Plus, ~~the stupid color~~ ~~it's~~ growing on me. Of course, the comforter is definitely overkill, but the coat ~~really isn't that~~ ~~isn't so~~ bad. ~~At least Hudson won't be able to pretend he didn't see me when he ignores me later.~~

**Commented [ep1]:** Not sure this is right. I want him to make fun of the fact that she ran away instead of talking about things but not that she doesn't have the right to say no...

**Commented [ep2]:** FIXED BUT REWORD AT WILL Need to change this b/c we changed the end of the last scene.

**Commented [TDE3]:** This line doesn't fit any more, does it? Let's just take it out?

“What time is it?” I ask as I slide the coat on then double check my backpack to make sure I have everything I might need. The plan is to travel down this morning and then back up tomorrow night, but I want to make sure I’ve brought enough work to do in case we stay until Sunday.

I mean, yeah, we’re going to spend most of our time looking for the Blacksmith and—hopefully—talking to him once we find him, but still. There’ll be some down time, and I want to take advantage of it by finishing my make-up architecture project and my essay for history. If I’m lucky, Jaxon will be in a decent enough mood to follow through on the help he offered the other day. And if he isn’t, well maybe one of my other friends could be persuaded.

“Nine fifteen,” Macy answers as she shrugs into her rainbow-colored jacket. It’s a change from the black she’s been wearing lately, and when I raise a pleased brow at her, she just shrugs. “I think maybe I want to feel good while I ruminate, too.”

Now I’m full out grinning. “I think that sounds like a really great idea.”

She nods and whispers, “Me too.”

We head out through Macy’s secret passageway—no need to tip off any of our new and unappreciated enemies that we’re leaving school for a couple of days. The last thing we need is one of our enemies clueing in that Hudson is no longer on Katmere Academy property. With how protected Giant City is with magic, we all feel fairly sure even if Cyrus discovered we were there, we’d be gone before he could marshal the Watch in the city walls anyway. Still, no sense taking a chance and advertising our adventure either.

We head down the passage to one of the exit doors on the first floor, and I keep thinking we’re going to run into one of the others. But it turns out they each must have gotten an early start, because when Macy and I push the final door open and step out into the slowly melting snow, it’s to find the rest of our friends already waiting on us.

“It’s about time,” Hudson says. It’s the first words he’s spoken to me since last night, and I barely keep my smile under control. Sure, they’re surly and not exactly polite, but that doesn’t bother me. Hudson is Hudson, after all, and I’m sure he slept about as well as I did.

“You’re welcome to get there on your own,” Macy says and gives him a sharp look then walks toward the edge of the clearing and tugs open her magic bag and pulls out her wand.

Hudson glances at me like, what’s that all about, but I just shrug and look as innocent as I can. No need for him to know I was *ruminating* about him earlier.

Everyone stands back as Macy sets eight candles on the ground, evenly spaced in a circle around us. “Gwen helped me create a portal big enough for all of us to go at once, since she’s visited Giant City before. These candles will keep this one available to us, and correct for the rotation of the Earth, too.”

Macy’s been practicing building portals all week with Gwen, and I am so proud of her when she creates this one on her first attempt. One minute, we’re standing on a field, patches of grass visible beneath the melting snow, and the next we’re sliding through the earth, the walls of the portal flying by so fast it looks like we’re inside a brilliant kaleidoscope.

I reach out with a hand and let my fingers flutter through the ~~whizzing jeweled tone~~-lights, ~~because of course Macy’s portal sparkling jeweled lights tinkling between them like water droplets~~sparkles like a rainbow, ~~and turn to Hudson and smile.~~ I turn to share my delight with Hudson, but he’s already grinning. He knows how special this is, too.

Before I know it, ~~the rainbows is gone and we’re I’m blinking and we’re~~ standing in the middle of a forest of massive trees, sun dappled light peaking between their branches.

~~Well, everyone else is standing. I’m kneeling on the mossy forest floor because apparently, I still can’t figure out how to land on my feet. a forest, massive tree trunks surround us in the dappled l’ight peaking between their branches on the mossy forest floor.~~

Hudson helps me up as Macy grins at everyone. “Pretty kickass, right?”

“So kickass,” Hudson tells her. “You made it look easy.”

“Maybe it was easy,” she tells him, still a little snooty because of our conversation earlier.

“Well, then, that just makes you more kickass, doesn’t it?” he counters. ~~Macy stands back and grins at everyone. “I totally just made that look easy, right?”~~

~~Hudson grins back at her and says, “That’s what awesome looks like.” And she folds like a bad poker hand, because Hudson is just that charming when he wants to be.~~

The two of them high five while the rest of us look around. And ~~realize that no matter how awesome the portal is, we still have a problem.~~

~~Because there’s no city—Giant or otherwise—anywhere around. they high five.~~

~~The only problem is...there’s no Giant City in sight.~~

**Commented [ep4]:** REWORD please I suck at description 😊

**Commented [ep5]:** I feel like we’re missing a joke here. She’d said she’d help bury the body but now she’s high fiving him. But I can’t for the life of me think what the joke would be. lol

## Chapter 54

“So, what do you think?” Flint asks Macy with a wide smile. “Getting any earth vibes?”

“I’m not a seismograph,” she tells him with a roll of her eyes. “I can’t just read the earth hundreds of miles in all directions.”

“I thought that was the plan?” Luca asks, sliding a hand around Flint’s waist as he joins us.

“The plan is for me to tap into the earth magic they use to keep themselves and their city hidden,” she answers, rummaging around in her magic pack around her waist and then inside her backpack. “Which I’m going to try to do.”

“What can we do to help?” Eden asks, as she comes up behind Macy.

“Stay out of my way,” she says, even as she shoots her a grin over her shoulder “I know it goes against the dragon superiority code, but this is one of those times where witches have to do the heavy lifting.” She flexes her fingers together, like she’s preparing for a workout at the gym.

~~“You should help her. Why don’t you try to help her, Grace?”~~ Hudson says, and all eyes turn to him.

“I thought this was a witch thing,” I tell him uneasily. “How can a I-gargoyle help?”

~~“Earth magic is what heals you. You probably have some kind of affinity for it.”~~

~~“Well, for starters, earth magic heals you, so you should at least be attuned to it.”~~

~~I swallow Ugh. I hate. I hated~~ even thinking about the day Hudson buried me alive to save my life. ~~I know he had to do it but it’s still one of the most awful things that has ever happened to me. Maybe even the most awful and I include the whole Lia human sacrifice debacle in that.~~ I ~~ved~~ wanted to ask him ~~a dozen dozens of~~ times how he knew to do that, ~~but I’m smart enough to know the shitstorm doing so would unleash. I have enough panic attacks these days without deliberately courting another one. t-well, I didn’t want the panic attack remembering that day would trigger so I just avoided the topic entirely.~~

~~——But that’s the whole thing, isn’t it? As I hear myself, I drop my head and sigh. I drop my head and sigh, because no matter how much I want to deny it,~~ Hudson’s right. I have *got* to get

~~beter about start learning a better way to approach dealing with~~ conflict. ~~And I guess there's no better time like the present.~~ ~~And I guess there's no time like the present to start.~~

I turn back to Hudson, but he's not where I expect him to be. Instead he's moved closer, and as our gazes meet, I can see the encouragement I need in his bright blue eyes. He wants me to ask the question, needs me to trust him enough to take a leap of faith.

And he's right. I know he is. I've wanted to know the answer to this question for weeks—am I really going to let a little fear stop me from finding out more about my gargoyle? And about myself?

I lift my gaze and seek out Hudson's again, who of course has moved closer and is watching me intently. His eyes are encouraging me to ask the question I've been too afraid to ask, to trust him and take a leap of faith, it'll all be okay. And I realize I *want* to know no matter the painful memories. I've been dying to know more about being a gargoyle for weeks, so was I really going to let a little fear stop me now?

I take a deep breath, blow it out slowly. And ask, —“So umm... How *did* you know burying me in the earth would heal me?”

~~He gives me a huge smile before saying,~~ The smile on his face is enough to light up the entire forest as he answers, “I remembered reading in one of the books in the library that gargoyles were immune to all forms of elemental magic—~~that were derived from~~ earth, air, fire, ~~and~~ water. ~~We~~ The elementals. ~~And we~~ already knew you could control water ~~and we already knew you could channel magic so I, an elemental, so I~~ figured gargoyles weren't ~~so~~ as much immune to the magic as they ~~were~~ able to deflect it—to channel it away from them in much the same way they could channel it into them.

“And if that was true, then you ~~can~~ just deflect it, channel it away from themselves. ~~Which means they~~ could manipulate it. You manipulated water, why not all the other elementals too?” ~~No reason you couldn't do more with other elementals than just deflect it.”~~

I wait for my heart to start beating too fast, for my lungs to empty of air at the reminder of being buried alive. But it doesn't happen. Instead all I can think about is finding out what else I might be able to do. What he was saying was so interesting, it wasn't remotely causing a panic attack. In fact, I wanted to hear *more*. —“But how did you go from thinking about elemental magic in general at to knowing I could heal with earth magic?” ~~earth magic could heal me?”~~

Commented [ep6]: FIXED but tweak as you want. This is a pivotal tiny growth moment.

Commented [TDE7R7]: I changed to present tense



~~He lifts a brow even as he gives me a self-satisfied smile.~~ “The Unkillable Beast, of course.”

Macy ~~leans against a tree as her~~ <sup>2</sup>s eyebrows shoot up ~~into~~ her hairline. “What does *he* have to do with earth magic?”

~~“He was huge, remember?” Hudson glances at her before turning back to me. “Hudson turns to look at her and asks, “Did you not happen to notice how big he was?”~~ He looked like he’d swallowed boulders for breakfast for the last hundred years.”

~~“And?” Flint asks. He looks as fascinated with all his as I am. I ask. I have no idea the point he’s trying to make, but my heart is pounding in my chest in anticipation.~~

Hudson winks at me. “Babe, if people kept coming to kill you and you couldn’t run away but you *could* use earth magic~~---~~ what would you do?”

My eyes widen, and not just because he called me babe, although that ~~doesid~~ make my heart skip a beat or two. ~~A slow smile spreads across my face as understanding dawns.~~ “I’d make myself as big and badass as I possibly could.”

He nods. “And use earth magic to *heal* your stone body, ~~I figured right?~~ Otherwise, how is a gargoyle trapped in a stone cave *unkillable*?”

~~Mekhiaey~~ whistles. “Okay, ~~Grace. B~~being a gargoyle just got ~~even more badass,~~ ~~eous.~~” about a hundred times more badass than it already was.”

~~“A thousand times,” Macy contradicts. “I mean, wow.” She’s grinning even wider than Hudson is.~~

~~Yeah, wow. Because in the middle of Hudson’s explanation, something else hit me. This guy, this amazing guy knew I was afraid to ask questions, afraid of finding out something I couldn’t handle. So he did it for me, just so he would have the answer when I was ready to ask. I don’t even think about it. I just walk over to this amazing guy, who even though I was afraid to ask the questions, had been researching about me for the day when I would ask.~~

~~I walk toward him and I’m not thinking about PDA. I’m not worrying about what Mekhi or Luca will tell Jaxon. All I’m thinking about is Hudson about is Hudson as And I wrap my arms around him, and hold him a tightly as I can, lay my head on his chest, and squeeze.~~

He hesitates for a second—~~like he’s surprised---~~ but then his arms snake around my waist and he hugs me back. He ~~bends over enough to res rests~~ his cheek on my head, and I close my

eyes, let his familiar ginger and sandalwood scent fill my senses and just breathe him in. It feels like coming home.

I don't know how long we stand like this, long enough for the others to drift away and give us a little privacy. Eventually, he murmurs, "You doing okay?"

I think of all the things I can answer to that question, all the feelings swimming in my eyes. Of how he pushed me to ask questions but also stood back and let me take my time to get here. Of how he knew I would eventually find a way to ask. And so—he waited for me. Like he's waiting for me now.

In the end, I say the only thing that I can. "Thank you."

He squeezes me against his chest again, crushes me against his warmth, and I know he heard everything I didn't say. He always does.

After a moment, he drops a soft kiss on the top of my head before leaning back and saying, "Not that I'm complaining having you in my arms or anything, but if I'm not mistaken, your cousin is about to do something seriously badass. Or maim us all."

I pull away and follow where he's looking...and my eyes go wide. Holy hell. My cousin is testing the weight of four insanely large athames in her hand, bouncing them up and down like she's about to throw—

"Oh my God!"

## Chapter 55

I gasp as she tosses the blades into the air as hard as she can.

We all look up in alarm, getting ready to dodge, but instead of falling back down and impaling one of us, they flatten out before arranging themselves into a kind of compass formation.

Hudson and I walk over to the clearing and marvel at the floating knives.

We wait for them to do something, anything, but for long seconds they just hang there—hilts facing inward, blades facing outward—and point to what I can only assume is North, South, East and West.

“So, what goes up *doesn’t* come down?” Flint whispers loudly after the seconds stretch into first one minute and then another.

“Shhhh,” Macy tells him as she lifts her wand above her head and starts swirling it around in a circle. “Gwen says the giants are constantly moving the entrance and the entire city is protected with confusion spells, so stray human hikers don’t wander in. Gimme a second to locate it.”

Seconds later, the athames start to spin in a circle too, faster and faster until they are whirling above our heads so quickly that it’s nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Until, all of a sudden, one starts to glow so brightly that it almost looks like it’s on fire.

The brighter it glows the faster and jerkier Macy’s movements become, until the other three knives drop like stones to the ground—amid yelps from the rest of us. Jaxon freezes them all mid-air before they can do any real arm then, with a wave of his hand, sends them to harmlessly fall beside Macy’s bag.

We barely have a chance to register what just happened before the fourth athame—which is glowing so brightly now that it’s hard to look at it—takes off, flying due South right into a huge clump of trees.

“Let’s go!” Macy shouts excitedly.

I'm still a tiny bit shaken by the very close call I just had with an athame, but in the end I suck it up. This is what we're here for, right?

The others are already racing after Macy, so I join the chase with Hudson hot on my heels. I smile at him—then deliberately knock my shoulder into his. And because he's a vampire and more than capable of holding his own, I put just a bit of stone into it.

He shoots me an inscrutable look as he takes the hit, then speeds up a little. It makes me grin, because this is his version of my shoulder check. Hudson would never hit me even in jest, but he will challenge me. A lot.

Good thing that's the way I like it.

I increase my speed to match his, and then we're racing through the forest, getting into denser and denser populations of trees, skipping over creeks and jumping over narrow ravines.

It's more fun than I ever would have expected.

I can hear the others up ahead—Macy and Eden in the lead, with the guys right behind them. Flint is closest to us, whooping and hollering as we all wind our way through this forest that already feels a little magical, even without the giants.

We jump over another creek—this one complete with tiny frogs jumping along its banks—when Hudson cuts to the right and starts to pull ahead of me. Determined not to let him get any advantage, I use my power to channel the water and smack him right in the face with a giant ball of it—including a couple of frogs.

He looks so shocked that I crack up, then take the tiny advantage granted to me by his surprise and run for the tree cover as fast as I possibly can.

He catches up with me quickly—big surprise—but I zig where he zags and dart right when he darts left. And while there's no water for me to throw up at him this time, the move still surprises a growl out of him, which then surprises a laugh out of me.

I'm smart enough to know he's coming for me now, so I reach for the silver string inside of me. Moments later, my wings are out, and I fly straight up and over him.

I can see the others from up here and they're still hot on the trail of the athame. It's moving fast, so Jaxon and Mekhi have moved up in front and Eden and Macy can drop back a little without worrying about losing sight of the knife. I'm at the very tops of the trees, but we're moving into denser, taller forest, so I start to fly up a little higher to get a look at the land out in front of us—and to make sure I don't hit any branches.

But before I can do much more than think about it, Hudson jumps straight through the tree branches to catch me.

I shriek a little as his arms come around me, but he just laughs and whispers, “Gotcha.”

I start to laugh with him, but the sound sticks in my throat along with the breath I just took because what started out as good-natured fun has turned into something completely different.

My wings made it impossible for him to grab me from the back, so we’re face to face, his mouth inches from mine and the front of his body pressed flush against the front of mine as he holds onto me. It feels good, really good, to be held by him like this, especially when the look on his face says he feels the same way.

And when he leans in, adjusting his grip so that it feels more like he’s holding me than simply holding on to me, heat explodes between us. My heart kicks up triple time, and whatever air I’ve managed to pull into my body leaves in a rush.

For a second, just a second, I think about winding myself around him, arms around his shoulders, legs around his hips. But then I remember where we are...and who is right below us.

He smiles even as he pulls back from me, and whispers, “See you on the ground.”

Then, he just let’s go and falls straight through the treetops back to earth.

I hold my breath until I see him land safely in a crouch, before he takes off running through the trees again. I start to drop lower, planning on landing a little bit ahead of where he is so we can run together again. But then I look out over the world in front of me and am transfixed by what I see.

Trees in all directions, lush and green and majestic. It’s one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen.

I’ve always considered myself an ocean girl—growing up on San Diego’s beautiful beaches will do that to a person—but this? This is breathtaking in a totally different way than the mountains of Alaska are.

I take a few spins, do a few loop-de-loops as I revel in the view—and that I’m not freezing my butt off for the first time in what feels like forever.

Down below me, there’s lush greenery as far as the eye can see, from mossy trails to tangled undergrowth to towering pines and redwoods that have been here for centuries. We’re

not so far inland yet that I can't see the Pacific Ocean to my right, but that only makes the whole experience feel more surreal.

Redwoods and the ocean and the big, beautiful sun shining so brightly over it all—after the freezing temperatures of the last several months of my life, this feels like paradise. It's still cold, of course, but not Alaska cold. And that makes me feel at home for the first time in a very long time.

I totally understand why the giants picked this area to settle in. If I had a choice, I think I'd settle here, too.

But I can't stay up here forever, no matter how tempting the view. We have a lot to accomplish and only a couple of days to do it in.

I land next to Hudson, who grins at me. "Took you long enough."

"Did you see the view up there?" I asked. "It's gorgeous."

"Yeah," he tells me softly. "It is."

There's something in his voice that tells me he's not talking about the view and that makes me feel all kinds of things again. Instead of leaning into them the way I want to—this isn't the time or the place—I run faster. And revel in the way Hudson stays beside me the whole time.

I'm beginning to think we're going to run forever—which isn't okay with me, no matter how good the view—when Jaxon shouts something from in front of us.

I can't hear what it is, but it sounds urgent so we all lay on the speed. And break through the tree line just in time to see the athame embed itself into the trunk what has to be the largest tree in the world.

## Chapter 56

Directly in front of us is the most beautiful grouping of sequoia redwoods that I have ever seen—and that’s saying something considering when I was ten, my parents took me to John Muir woods as part of our Northern California vacation, and I became obsessed with the redwood trees there. We ended up spending half of our ten-day vacation wandering through forests of giant sequoias and coastal redwoods, just because I couldn’t get enough of them.

Because these trees we are standing in front of now are beautiful, perfect, *amazing*. All those years ago, I felt the magic in the Muir Woods redwoods. I remember standing among these majestic trees and spinning around and around, giggling with sheer joy, wildflowers of every imaginable color stretching up to tickle my outstretched arms.

I remember I never wanted to leave and begged my parents for us to stay forever.

They refused, of course—my parents’ jobs and our life was in San Diego—but I still remember how bitterly disappointed I was. How I couldn’t understand why they would choose not to feel this kind of magic every second of every day if they could.

But what I felt then is *nothing* compared to what I feel standing here now. The trees are all but glittering with the magic sparking off of them, and I feel honored, overwhelmed, insignificant standing before them.

I walk up to the giant tree and pull the athame from its trunk, and I swear I hear it groan. I hand the knife to Macy and then lean forward and place both my hands on the tree’s massive trunk. I rest, my cheek against its rough bark, and close my eyes. I, and feel the soft earth beneath my feet. I and draw it’s magic up my body, and then channel it out of my hands and straight into the tree.

—~~Instantly.~~ And I feel an answering magic from the tree skim through my body and back out my feet and into the earth around me. An infinite loop of energy, of nature, and I'm a part of it, breathing with it and humbled by it.

After a moment, I step away from the tree and turn to face my friends. We still have to find the entrance to the city.

But they're all staring at me, jaws slack and wonderment in their eyes. Even Jaxon looks stunned.

"What—?" I ask and look around and freeze as I realize—I'm surrounded by wildflowers where there were none a minute before, huge and tall, and every imaginable color.

And the giant sequoia no longer has a gash where the athame had lodged itself.

Hudson steps forward and snaps one of the flowers about three inches down its stalk then pushes the brilliant blue flower's stem behind my ear. "You are amazing."

I duck my head as heat blooms in my cheeks, but Flint's shout of surprise snaps my head back up.

And now I'm the one standing, open-mouthed in wonderment, as Giant City is finally revealed.



## Chapter 56

I blink several times, just to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me.

Because the wall of thick sequoias is gone now—~~as if they were just a magical wall hiding what lays beyond. And what has taken their place is ... beyond description, some sort of magical wall having been dropped, and what's there now is beyond description. I don't know where to look first, my gaze daring from My greedy eyes dart from structure structure to~~ structure, some high in the trees, others almost hidden between massive tree trunks, and all of it bustling with giants.

Standing right in front of us, tucked up against the base of the first redwood, is what looks to be a guard house, just big enough for a giant—or two.

Even more astonishing is what's going on behind the guard house—a busy, bustling town filled with giants, all of whom are going about their lives with absolutely no idea we exist, let alone that we are watching them.

“This is incredible,” Luca whispers, walking closer to get a better view.

“Totally incredible,” Macy echoes as she, too, moves closer. “And, oh my gosh! There's another building!” she squeals. “It's huge, but you can barely see it because of the way it's designed. This is...”

“Magical,” I tell her, stepping around Flint and Jaxon so I can see what she's seeing. “Oh wow. It is huge.”

The building she's talking about is hidden between three of the larger trees, so they give it incredible cover. The base of each tree has to be close to thirty feet wide and I can't even begin to guess how tall each of them are considering all I see when I look up is more tree.

The building—which is made from gorgeously polished wood—is probably close to fifty feet tall on its own, but its dwarfed by the trees surrounding it on all sides.

“The design of the wood alone is incredible,” Macy comments as we get closer. “How does anyone design a building to look like that?”

“I think it's kind of plain,” Flint says.

“Plain? Are you kidding me?” I gasp. “It's gorgeous.”

**Commented [ep8]:** FIXED but reword at will. Need to transition from the new chapter break I added.

“Okay.” He shrugs in an everyone’s allowed their own opinion kind of way, but then I realize he’s not looking at the same trees Macy and I are looking at. He’s staring several feet to the left of us—which I don’t understand, because there’s nothing there.

“I don’t think it’s that big,” Eden agrees with him. “It’s cool the way they’ve done it, but—”

“Wait a minute. That’s an entirely different building!” I exclaim, finally able to see what they’re talking about now that I’ve walked closer to them.

And they’re right. It is plain...and small. A tiny little dollhouse of a building completely encapsulated by the ring of giant trees that surround it. They’re a lot thinner—and obviously younger—than the ones I was looking at earlier, but the tiny little building fits beautifully within them.

I move even closer to get a better look, then turn back to say something to Macy, only to realize that the building she and I were staring at just a few moments ago, is gone. It’s completely vanished.

“Oh my God.” I know what’s going on here. “You can’t see it.”

Flint looks at me like I’m very, very confused. “Sure I can. It’s right there.”

“No!” I grab his arm and start tugging him over to where Macy is standing as I wave the others over.

“Holy shit!” Flint exclaims all of a sudden. “Where did that come from?”

“What do you mean?” Macy asks. “It’s been here all along.”

“No,” Jaxon starts. “It wasn’t—”

“Yes,” I tell him excitedly. “It was.”

I look around, trying to spot more buildings, but I can’t see any others from where I’m standing. Except the giants are obviously coming in and out of somewhere, so the buildings must be here, hidden between the trees, like these two are.

“I’ve heard of this before,” I tell them. “When I was thinking of going to UC Santa Cruz for college.” It seems like a million years ago instead of just a few months. “When we went to visit, they made a huge deal of talking about the architecture, and how the whole campus is designed so that you can only see two buildings at any one time, so as not to mess with the landscape. They have redwoods, too.”

And, admittedly, their architecture is a lot more utilitarian than these whimsical buildings, but the environmentalism behind the design is the same. I'd fallen in love with the campus all those months ago, and now I've fallen in love with this Giant City, just as completely.

"It's the sickest thing I've ever seen," Luca says as he paces from one edge of the clearing to the other. "Do you think the whole city's like that?"

"I would bet on it." Hudson walks a little more to the right and points out a third building none of us had noticed yet. It's a candy shop, I think, judging from the different colored jelly beans painted on the roof. "This is all too carefully done for it to just be a whim."

"Yeah," I agree, tilting my head back as far as I can in an effort to see to the tops of the nearby trees.

"This is where the fairytale really comes from," Hudson says, lightly resting a hand on my lower back as he too looks up.

"Oh my God, you're right. Not beanstalks. Redwoods."

He grins. "Exactly."

"Wait a minute." I narrow my eyes at him. "You said you didn't know that story when I brought it up in my room."

He holds my gaze for a second, then deliberately glances away. "I looked it up, afterward."

"You did? Really?"

He shrugs. "It seemed important to you."

"Not important, just..." I blow out a breath and let it drop. Because what I want to say is that his parents suck. That it's not fair that he doesn't know something as simple as Jack and the Beanstalk because his parents are selfish assholes who probably never read him a bedtime story in his life. That tutors are great for the brain but maybe not so great for everything else.

Between Cyrus trying to get him to use his power to destroy his enemies and Delilah ignoring him unless he needed him to be an accessory, Hudson's childhood was a nightmare. I realize he probably wouldn't appreciate my pity. I'd guessed he didn't know the fairytale because he'd never had a parent read him the story at bedtime when he was a kid. Hudson's childhood was awful, but He never -he never- uses it as an excuse, though. Never even talks about it at all, unless I ask him a direct question. But he thought the story meant something to me, so he made the time to read it.

**Commented [ep9]:** NEEDS WORK I don't think this is worded right but I'd like to make the point he never makes excuses or mentions the things he missed with his childhood. Meredith mentioned to me today that all Damon does is whine about his past, so I like the idea of differentiating them.

~~I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that, except lean into his side and lace our fingers together as I whisper.~~ "Thank you," ~~I whisper, leaning into his side and lacing our fingers together.~~

~~He seems startled and, at first,~~ At first he seems startled and I think he's going to pull away. But then he sighs, and I feel his body relaxing—slowly, slowly, slowly—against mine. "You're welcome," he tells me, and his accent is super pronounced. "Now if only we can figure out why those pesky magic beans got added to the story."

"Only one way to find out," I say with a laugh.

He lifts a brow. "And how is that exactly?"

I look around at my friends, all of whom look as in awe of this city as I am. "We ask someone," I answer as I tug his hand and head straight for the guard house.

## Chapter 55

"I thought they couldn't see us," Eden says as she follows close on my heels.

"Seems like a terrible defense, that we can see them and they can't see us," Flint adds, and I have to admit I agree.

We approach the guard house gingerly, not because we're afraid so much as because we don't want to startle the guards.

Except as we move to walk up to the guard house's front window, it becomes apparent that they absolutely know we're here, even if they haven't said anything to us before now. The massive slingshot one of them has aimed directly at us—loaded with a boulder almost as big as I am—says that much. As does the sword the other one has drawn.

"Who are you?" one of them demands in a voice so loud it shakes the ground around us.

He's much taller (like five feet taller) and larger than Mr. Damasen—they both are—and has a bushy brown beard, a wide, burly chest covered by a black uniform shirt, ~~red and black checked shirt~~, and the most suspicious blue eyes I have ever run across—which is saying

**Commented [ep10]:** NEEDS WORK if he's a guard, he'd be wearing a uniform. And not a uniform that makes him look like he works at Freddy's Frozen Custard. ;)

**Commented [TDE11R11]:** I was thinking Paul Bunyan. Giant. Trees. Beard. Axe.

something, considering I'm mated to Hudson Vega. Suspicion is pretty much his first, last, and middle name.

"What is your business at The Firmament?" asks the second, who is smaller than the first, but only a little which is to say he only towers over me by about six feet.

He's also younger looking, though I don't know if it's because he's actually younger or if it's because he doesn't have a beard covering two thirds of his face. His eyes are the same strange gold as Mr. Damasen's, but he wears his dark blond hair pulled back in a man bun and black tattoos decorate his forearms below the rolled up sleeves of his ~~blue and gray flannel shirt~~ uniform.

**Commented [ep12]:** See note above

He's no less dangerous looking, though, thanks to the giant saber he has braced over his shoulder.

"The Firmament?" I ask. "Is that the name of your city?"

His eyes narrow dangerously. "State your business with us or be on your way."

"We have no official business—"

"Then hit the forest," says the bearded one. "We have no use for a band of lost lilliputians, even if you be a wee bit magical."

My eyes widen at the familiar term for the tiny, arrogant people in *Gulliver's Travels*.

"You know what we are?" Eden asks, her own face as suspicious as the giants'.

"I can smell ye, can't I?" interjects the blond one. "Now go, before we decide to call pest control to exterminate ye."

All right, so maybe walking right up and trying to talk to them without a cover story in place wasn't a great plan, but to be fair, what kind of cover story were we supposed to come up with?

We were lost and our magic just happened to expose your city?

We want to join The Firmament?

We fell down a rabbit hole with four ~~vampires, two dragons, a witch, and a gargoyle?~~  
Sounds like the start to a very bad joke

**Commented [ep13]:** Did all seven go? I think only Jaxon, Hudson, Luca and Mekhi, yes?

**Commented [TDE14R14]:** That is four. Did I say 7?

"We don't plan to stay long," Macy says sweetly. "We're looking for someone, and we were hoping one of you might be able to help us out."

"You want to find a giant?" Brown Beard says. "I don't think so. Now walk away, or I'll make you walk away."

I can feel Flint tensing next to me, can sense the way Jaxon is shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet, and I'm really worried this is about to go south, fast. And then we'll be totally screwed as this lead—unhelpful as it appears—is the only one we've currently got.

I'm pretty sure Hudson feels the same way, because he shifts so that he's directly in front of both Jaxon and Flint, even as he says, "Actually, we were trying to keep a low profile as we're traveling in such a small group, but several of us are representatives from the Northern Circle." He gestures to Flint, Jaxon, and myself. "Four of us are members of the ruling families, and we were hoping to pay our respects to the Colossor and Colossa while we are in the area."

If possible, Brown Beard's eyes narrow even more. "We weren't informed of any royal visit."

"It was an impromptu trip," I jump in hastily. "But when we found ourselves on your borders, it felt churlish not to stop and pay our respects to your own ruling family."

Mekhi chokes a little bit at my use of churlish—and yes, I admit it's a bit historical and over the top—but everything about these guys screams over the top. I feel like leaning into it is the way to go. And if it's not...well, they weren't going to let us in anyway, so no harm no foul.

Both of the giants continue to look suspicious, but they also look concerned now, like they're afraid of the consequences of turning away members of other paranormal royal families without at least a consult with someone on their rulers' staffs.

Talk about a good call on Hudson's part. Using royal credentials to get in when we're actually here in search of a way to bring *down* the vampire king is more than a little ironic, but who am I to judge? At this point, I'm very much a whatever works/any port in a storm kind of girl.

Besides, it's not like we're lying. We are who we say we are, and we mean absolutely no harm to the Giants or anyone else...well, besides Cyrus.

And maybe Cole, the jerk. I wouldn't mind hurting him a little.

After demanding our names, Blond Ponytail orders us to "Wait right here," as he and Brown Beard move to the back of the guard house to try to decide what to do with us. The funny part is that they try to whisper, but their voice boxes aren't exactly cut out for that, so we hear everything they say—including the part about throwing us in the oubliette if they have to.

I have no idea what an oubliette is, but judging from the delight on their faces when they say it, I can't help thinking it has something to do with a jail cell...or worse, a dungeon. Which is not how I was hoping this would go.

To be fair, I never anticipated that there would be a guard house at all. I'm not sure what I thought, but whatever it was, it focused on convincing people to talk to us rather than trying to avoid a dungeon—excuse me, an oubliette—in our first ten minutes in the city.

We wait as phone calls are made, another discussion is had, more phone calls are made. The others are getting impatient—which doesn't exactly surprise me in regards to Flint or Eden, because if Katmere has taught me anything, it's that dragons shoot first and ask questions later.

But even Mekhi, Luca, and Macy are looking like they want to make a break for it. Jaxon looks ready to level the entire city at the first inkling of a threat. Only Hudson and I seem to be out for a casual stroll as we wait.

Eventually, the guards come back to us, and they don't look happy—though I'm not sure what we've done to set them off this time other than simply existing. Not that I'm about to ask.

“We haven't been able to get ahold of the Colossor or Colossa,” Brown Beard tells us with a frown, “And their advisors aren't willing to let an unknown paranormal into the Firmament without strict permission.”

“Unknown paranormal?” Hudson asks. “We've already identified ourselves—”

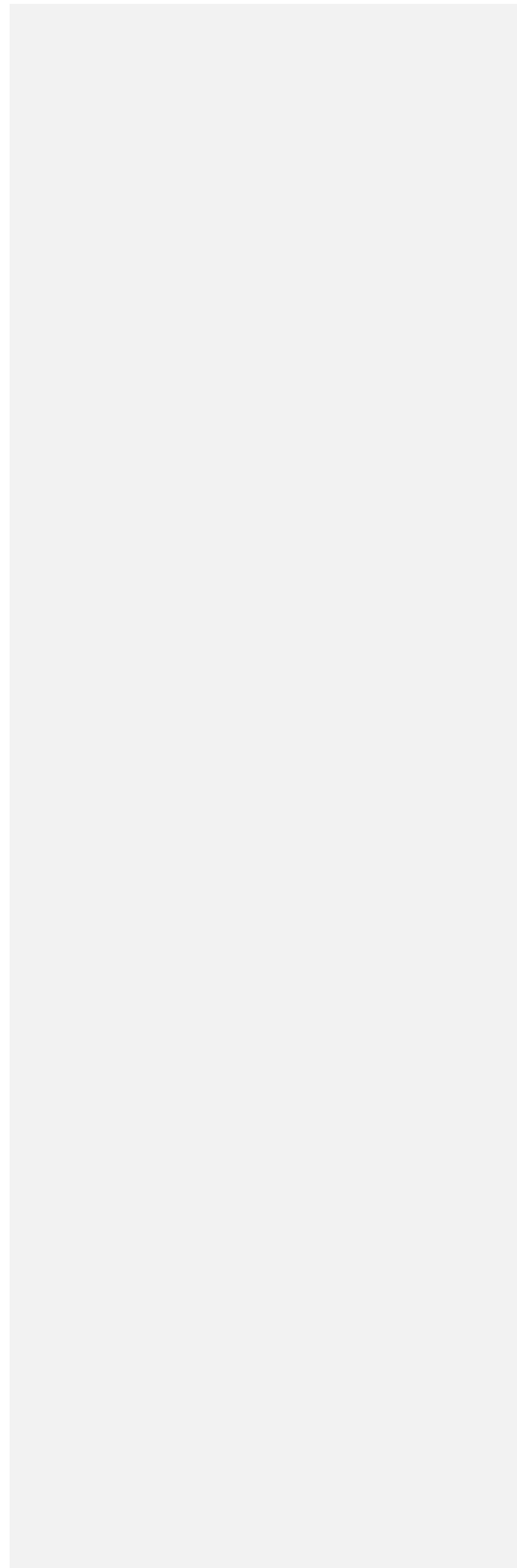
“You said you were from the Northern Circle. That means dragons, wolves, vampires, and witches,” Blond Ponytail interjects. “But she—” he glares at me “—is none of those things. So, until we know what she is and have permission for her to enter, the whole group of you stay right here.”

He starts to shut the window before his words even register, but before one of us can get a hand in to hold up the window closing and try to convince him to change his mind, I hear a tinkling laugh.

And turn to see one of the most gorgeous girls I have ever seen walking toward us. That she is also nearly twelve feet tall despite only being twelve or thirteen-years-old only makes her beauty more obvious and her excitement inescapable.

Commented [ep15]: I love these terms!!

Commented [TDE16R16]: ☺





## Chapter 56

**Commented [ep17]:** A lot of this chapter was reworked for cauldrons. Reword at will.

“Oh my gosh, it’s true! Vampires here, at The Firmament! I couldn’t believe it when Rygor told me.” She holds out her enormous hands to us. “Come in, come in! It’s been so long since we’ve had visitors. I can’t wait to talk to all of you.”

“Cala Erym.” Brown Beard drops into a deep bow. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think it’s safe for you to meet with these people. They haven’t been cleared by your parents—”

“Give me a break, Baldwin.” She rolls her bright purple eyes at him even as her sleek black ponytail shakes back and forth. “I don’t think the Vampire Court is here to assassinate us. And if they were, they wouldn’t announce their presence by showing up at the guard house first.”

She turns to us. “I’m Erym, Cala of the Giant Court. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you.” Hudson steps forward with a practiced smile that is as unexpected as it is impressive and introduces himself. This is Hudson the diplomat, I realize as I watch him introduce himself and then chat easily with Erym. This is the vampire raised at court that I’ve heard about, but that I’ve never really seen before.

Flint steps forward too and does a half bow that is both rakish and charming, as he takes Erym’s hand, which is about twice the size of his. “I’m Flint Montgomery, First Prince of the Dragon Court. It’s good to meet you, Cala Erym.”

She giggles, then gives him a half-curtsy back. “It’s good to meet you, too, Prince Flint. Dragons have always been my favorite.”

“And giants have always been mine,” he answers with a wink.

She giggles again, maybe even blushes a little, and Luca chuckles behind me. I glance at him to see what he thinks is so funny, but he’s smiling indulgently at Flint. When he catches me looking at him, he gives a tiny eyeroll and a shrug. It’s totally his *Isn’t Flint the most adorable thing in the entire world* look, and he’s so right that I can’t help grinning back at him.

After Flint is done charming Erym, Jaxon moves forward and introduces himself to her as well. He’s not flirtatious like Flint or smooth like Hudson, but that doesn’t seem to matter to Erym, whose eyes light up the second his palm touches hers.

Behind me, Mekhi snickers just a little because it's so obvious that she's about to have a giant-sized crush on Jaxon, and I elbow him softly in the ribs. Partly because it's rude and partly because I know exactly how Erym feels. It wasn't that long ago that I was falling for Jaxon nearly as fast.

Erym greets the others with a gracious smile, but when I step forward to introduce myself, she claps enthusiastically. "Oh my gosh! You're the gargoyle we've all heard so much about! Welcome, Grace! Welcome!"

And then she picks me up like I'm a rag doll and gives me a giant-sized hug.

"It's so exciting to finally meet you!" she says, even as she shakes me around like I'm a favorite pet. "And to think you're really here, at the Firmament! I can't wait to introduce you to Xeno! He's always trying to leave because he says nothing exciting ever happens here but look—" She gently sets me back down on the ground. "Look at all the fascinating people who have come to see us!"

I'm a little overwhelmed from having just been picked up and patted on the head like a puppy, but she's so sweetly innocent that it's impossible for me to be annoyed with her. A quick look around tells me everyone else is having the exact same reaction.

"Well, come on!" she says, waving an arm for us to follow her as she starts half walking, half skipping back into the town. "I can't wait to show you *everything*!"

Blond Ponytail moves in to try to stop her one last time, but she just waves him away with a, "Stop worrying, Vikra! We'll be fine." She looks over at us. "Right, guys?"

We all nod enthusiastically, because what else are we supposed to do? Also, it's pretty obvious none of us want to disappoint her.

"What do you want to see first?" she asks as she starts leading us through the center of town.

"Whatever you'd like to show us," Flint answers. "We've never been to the Firmament before, but it looks absolutely amazing."

She shrugs. "I don't know about amazing, but there are a bunch of fun things to do. Plus, I instructed Rygor to prepare a banquet in your honor for tonight. Mama and Papa will be home by then, and they will be as excited to meet you as I am."

“Is there a hotel or an inn we can check into for the night?” Hudson asks as we wind our way through several small groupings of trees, each with some kind of house or building secure inside of it.

“You don’t actually think I’m going to let you stay at a hotel, do you, silly?” She gives him a light pat on the shoulder that nearly sends him flying. “You’ll stay with us, of course.”

“We wouldn’t want to impose,” Flint tries, but Erym just shakes her head.

“It’s no imposition. We have plenty of room.” She rubs her hands together. “Now what do you say I give you a tour of The Firmament, and we can all have some fun along the way?”

It’s not quite the investigation we had in mind for our first day here, but her enthusiasm is infectious. Besides, when will we ever have another chance to explore a city made by giants?

“I say, what’s first? I’ve heard your Gorbenschlam Challenge is an experience not to be missed,” Mekhi tells her with a grin then winks at Macy.

“That’s the spirit!” She holds up a hand for a fist bump, and Mekhi doesn’t leave her hanging. But he does brace himself first—a lot—and she still manages to push him back a foot or three.

I can’t help laughing, because walking through this beautiful city with Erym—surrounded by my friends and the most magical trees in existence—is the most fun I’ve had in a very long time. After weeks and months of feeling scared and sad and sometimes even downright awful, it’s like I can finally breathe again.

Everywhere we go, giants stop to stare at us. Some are bold enough to come up and ask Cala Erym to introduce them while others just watch or wave from afar. It feels strange being the center of attention like this, but then I try to imagine what it would be like at Katmere if eight giants just started walking through the halls. I’m pretty sure there would be a lot of staring then as well.

One of the first things I notice is that there are no vehicles of any sort in the Firmament. Everyone gets around on foot or on giant tricycles that are definitely bigger than we are. It seems odd that there is no other transportation here, but area wise, it’s really not that big of a town, since they make the best use of the vertical space as well. Besides, when you’re between ten and twenty feet tall, I’m guessing you can walk pretty fast when you want to.

“Let’s go this way!” Erym says as she herds us around a redwood with a base that has to have a circumference of close to ninety feet. The thing is massive, and unlike so many of the

other trees, it doesn't have a building nestled between it and some of the surrounding trees. Instead, down near the bottom, the trunk has been partially hollowed out so that people can actually walk straight inside of the tree.

Above the twenty-foot triangular shaped door is a sign that reads, "Giant Cauldrons."

"Oh my god!" Macy shouts as understanding dawns. "All this time, I thought they were called 'giant cauldrons' because they were so huge! Seriously, you can easily fit three people into some of the bigger ones. But really they're *Giant Cauldrons*?" Macy asks, her voice dripping in awe as she moves closer to the tree door. "You make *witch's cauldrons*?"

"Of course." Erym grins indulgently. "Giants are the best metal-workers in the world because we can easily manipulate earth magic into everything we create. Come on. I'll see if I can talk Sumna into letting you observe the process."

She says the last extra loud, even as she bats her big purple eyes at the older woman behind the very high counter near the entrance to the tree. She's got long brown hair, which she wears in a single braid down her back, and though her face is serious, her bright mocha-colored eyes are awash with mischief as she winks at Erym.

"Are you sure you want to give away all of our secrets?" she asks, but she smiles at Erym before moving over to an area about thirty feet behind her where an easily ten-foot giant is working at a massive wooden bench. Behind him is a roaring fire in a pot-bellied stove. So strange that we couldn't feel the fire until we got closer, but I suppose if you're going to build a fire *inside* a tree, you needed to protect it with serious magic.

His beefy hands ~~awere~~ encased in orange leather gloves, his face covered by an apparatus similar to a welder's mask. Large metal tongs are clipped onto the side of a metal bowl and he uses them to turn the bowl this way and that as he presses ~~sd~~ a long metal rod with a bright orange metal ball on the end along the inside of the bowl, only pausing every few minutes to drop the cooled ball into the fire to reheat it before starting again.

The whole process doesn't look anything more special than how I'd imagine you'd make a cauldron, if I'd ever bothered to consider it before today, that is. But then the giant places the long metal rod with the ball back into the fire, lifts his mask, and then leans forward and whispers along the side of the cauldron, slowly turning it into his breath.

**Commented [ep18]:** FEEL FREE TO DESCRIBE TO IT DIFFERENTLY I HAVE NO IDEA HOW YOU MAKE A CAULDRON lol

Runes of various different shapes and sizes start to appear all over the outside of the cauldron, everywhere his breath meets the cooling metal. They flame a bright orange like the fire before fading to red and eventually disappear into the black metal as they cool.

“Are those magical runes?” Macy all but squeals, her eyes glued to the fading symbols.

“They are indeed,” Sumna tells her, and this time she doesn’t even bother to hide her smile. “Each cauldron is blessed with a special type of magic, depending on what the blacksmith’s purpose in each creation is. Some cauldrons are meant to create healing spells, others to bring harmony and balance, and there are even those for war.”

“I’d heard that, but I had no idea this is how you did it!” Macy grins at me. “My dad is going to *die* when I got to see how our cauldron was made.”

A quick look at Flint and Eden and the vampires tells me they are just as fascinated by the entire process as Macy.

Macy’s eyebrows hit her hairline as she gasps. “Does this mean each blacksmith has their own talent, their own spells, and that’s what an Amweldonlis Cauldron is—it was made by the giant named Amweldonlis?”

Sumna’s smile is as big as her face now. “Close. The first part is the blacksmith’s name and the second is the name of the tree it was crafted within. An Amweldonlis Cauldron was made by Amweld in the Onlis Tree.”

She points to one of the giant redwoods not far from her shop. “Like, that’s the Falgron tree. It helps infuse spells with strength and goodness. Which is why it’s my favorite tree.” She smiles at Macy. “And that is why the cauldron your family uses is a Sumnafalgron.”

Macy’s mouth drops open “How did you—”

“I know where all my cauldrons go, sweetheart. They are very near and dear to my heart and I want to ensure they have a good home. Your father is a very good man. I was honored for him to use one of my cauldrons.”

“I can’t—” Macy’s voice breaks and tears bloom in her eyes.

Eden wraps an arm around her and whispers, “Coolest thing ever, huh?”

My cousin nods. “The coolest.”

**Commented [ep19]:** FIXED: I did this for two reasons: 1) to make it easier to find Falia and 2) to justify people who must know harming a tree hurts earth magic. Now the tree’s magic has a purpose and is symbiotic for the giant’s. Them carving houses out of these majestic trees never really made sense to me.

. “You see,” Sumna continues. “TThe trees in Giant City speak to us. They offer us their magic, to build our houses and our shops. We always use them for making our cauldrons, or really any of our metal work. The tree’s own magic where the metal was crafted brings something special to the item as well as the blacksmith. In fact, the tree’s magic is so important, blacksmiths have been known to seek out a specific tree for a particular commission.”

She puts a hand to one side of her mouth and leans towards us, as though she’s about to share a trade secret she doesn’t want anyone else to overhear. “I’m especially partial to jewelry made within the Manwa tree.” Her eyes are positively twinkling now. “That tree is known to give the wearer a special glamour of beauty.”

Macy glances at Eden with an awed look on her face, motions with one hand that her mind is blown, and Eden laughs.

And I have to say, it’s all really, really cool. I’m so intrigued, I’d forgotten why we came when Hudson nudges me with his elbow as Sumna suggests Erym take the group over to another giant just starting his cauldron process, a hunk of metal six feet tall resting on his workbench.

Sumna starts to head back to her position at the front of the tree, and Hudson follows her.

“Excuse me, Sumna?” Hudson calls out, smooth as butter, and she stops and turns with a smile. “I’m sorry to bother you. But I was wondering if you have a blacksmith in town who makes magical cuffs?”

Sumna winks at him. “Honey, half the city are blacksmiths. And all of them dabble in crafting jewelry as well as cauldrons. What are you in the need of?”

My stomach sinks. We’d just assumed the Blacksmith was his name, like with a capital B. How foolish I feel now as I realize that’s not his name at all, it’s just his profession. The Bloodletter told us to find the blacksmith who made the cuff—not *The Blacksmith*.

I turn to Hudson, my eyes asking how in the world we can find a man whose name we don’t know in a city where half its inhabitants are similarly employed. He just winks at me and turns back to Sumna.

“Can you help me out then? There’s this girl I want to impress, but I kind of screwed up. Well, I got this girl I want to impress,” he lies smoothly. “I got into some trouble at school and now I’m grounded for a few weeks.” But I was sort of a bad boy at school, and I got this magical cuff put on my wrist, grounding all of my abilities for two weeks.” He lifts his wrist to show her

his cuff. “But if I don’t get this cuff off, I’m not going to stand a chance.” How can I convince her I’m the guy for her if I’m just a regular old vamp?”

Sumna studies the cuff for a second then shakes her head and frowns. “I’m so sorry, son, but the blacksmith who made these original cuffs hasn’t been seen in centuries.”

Which is pretty much the last thing any of us~~we~~ wanted to hear.

**Commented [ep20]:** NOTE TO SELF: Go back to bloodletter scene and have her tell them it’s the same person that made Hudson’s cuff.

## Chapter 57

My shoulders sag. How are we ever going to free the Unkillable Beast and find the Crown without the right blacksmith?

But Hudson is determined. He turns up the charm and gives the giant a wink. “Now come on, Sumna. I really love this girl. There’s gotta be something I can do, someone who can help me.”

Sumna holds his gaze for a beat before she chuckles. “Oh I remember young love. So foolhardy and exciting.” She pauses to look around for the others at the other end of the factory, then leans into Hudson and whispers conspiratorially, “I hear his wife still does some repairs on his old work. She might be willing to help you. Maybe. She’s not been the same since her husband left, but she’s got a soft spot for young love. If she’s working, it’ll be in the Soli Tree.”

Hudson positively beams at her. “I won’t forget this, Sumna! If you’re ever in the Vampire Court, I’d be honored to show you around.”

The older woman blushes like a schoolgirl as she swats him away. “Oh, you are a handful, aren’t you?” Her eyes turn to mine. “Is this your girl?”

Hudson doesn’t hesitate. “Yes, ma’am.”

She studies me, her eyes going wide for a second before the brown orbs twinkle devilishly. “Yes, I can see why you want to impress this young lady. She’s positively radiant with magic. It’ll take a lot for you to keep up with her.”

“You have no idea,” Hudson agrees, his steady gaze holding mine. “But I’ll spend the rest of my life trying.”

Is this just part of his act, ~~I wonder, or does he or did he~~ really mean ~~those words~~ what he’s saying? ~~It’s probably he former can’t tell~~, but that doesn’t stop the heat from warming my cheeks or my heart from pounding fast and hard in my chest.

“I think he does pretty well,” I tell her. “I’m still getting a handle on my gargoyle magic.”

And then the old woman does something completely startling. She sniffs me. “Yes, I definitely smell the gargoyle in you, ~~but...~~” She sniffs again. “I was referring to something else.

**Commented [TDE21]:** I think this is too much. Can we tone it back a little



~~Something much more ancient and powerful. There's something more, too.~~ What were your parents?"

I'm so surprised by her question, I answer without thinking. "My father was a warlock, but my mother was just a human."

Her eyes narrow. "Hmm. Was she now?" A few seconds pass, but then her features soften again, and she laughs. "Look at me, being fanciful. Now go on, you two, get that cuff off, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She's still laughing to herself about that last comment as she walks away, and I stare at Hudson and mouth *What the hell?*

He shrugs. "Giants."

I want to ask him what he thinks she meant, but Erym and the rest of our group are done with the other demonstration and join us again.

"Come on, you guys. I have so much more to show you." Erym ushers us around a corner and down a quiet street filled with little clumps of trees, each with its very own house inside of it.

The Firmamaent's suburbs, I wonder as she rushes us past. Or downtown condos?

"You came on the best day of the week," she explains as we turn another corner, this time onto a street that's got a lot more buzz going on as people move back and forth between shops, carrying bags of everything from bread to books. "It's Market Day!"

"Market Day?" Eden asks as we wind our way down the lightly crowded street. "Do you mean like a farmer's market?"

When Erym gives her a blank look, she clarifies, "A market where you can get fresh food?"

"It's a market where you can get anything and everything," Erym answers as she herds us around one more corner.

And as I look at the gorgeous, colorful melee spilling out in all directions in front of us, I can't help but think that she's right. This market has everything.

We're obviously in the town square, or the closest thing to it that the Firmament has. Though a large, square like area is outlined in redwoods, the whole center is completely clear. It's the most land I've seen without trees since we arrived in this area several hours ago, and it's filled to the brim with huge, colorful tents in shades of red, blue, green.

**Commented [ep22]:** FIXED I'm using this to make it easier to get to the blacksmith's wife (pacing is off) but also, might as well plant the seed that Grace is more than just a gargoyle. Since Giants can smell magic, it's the perfect place to slip it in without making a big deal of it. ☺

Giants are wandering from tent to tent, large canvas bags in their hands as they scoop up one treasure or another. The air is redolent with the scents of fresh bread and beer and flowers, and it should be a nauseating combination, but it actually smells really good. Especially when you add the scent of buttered popcorn currently floating through the air and overlaying everything.

As we get closer, I can see inside the tents and what they're selling—everything from the aforementioned flowers to bubble bath to shoes I could hide in to cupcakes the size of a giant's fist (which in our world would simply be called triple layer cakes). Artists and artisans are hawking their wares—paintings the size of my bedroom wall, gorgeous wooden furniture so tall that I can't see the tops of some of it, necklaces that look like belts.

It's the most fantastic thing I've ever seen.

My parents and I used to wander through craft fairs and farmer's markets all the time in San Diego, but none of them were this spectacular. And none of them had a party vibe like this one, with food that smells so spectacular my mouth is actually watering.

"Where do you want to start?" Macy asks, and she looks as excited as I feel.

But Hudson quickly jumps in, "Erym, do you know where I could find the Soli Tree? I hear the blacksmiths there make the best -most divine jewelry."

Erym claps her hands. "Oh they do, although you better be sure you really love your girl before you buy something for her there." She tosses me a wink. "The Soli Tree lends immortal magic to its creations. Jewelry from this tree is the most sought after in the whole world."

I swallow the lump in my throat that forms at the word immortal. Would the tree's immortality make the beast's cuff unbreakable? Hudson seems unphased by this news and reaches down to hold my hand, tossing me a wicked grin before replying, "Oh I think this one might be a keeper."

The giant laughs and gives Hudson directions to the tree, which is at the other end of the market area. Hudson nods and catches Jaxon's eye, some sort of silent communication passing between the two of them. They must reach an agreement, though, because -before they must reach an agreement because Jaxon coughs and turns to Erym.

"I think perhaps we should split up," Jaxon suggests. "It'll help us get through more booths quicker."

**Commented [ep23]:** Should flint make a gagging sound or something at this comment? lol

**Commented [ep24]:** My god I suck at choreography.

**Commented [ep25]:** Reworked all of this to match the earlier changes.

Erym squeals and says, “That’s a great idea!” She grabs onto Jaxon’s hand. “*You* come with me. We’ll meet the others back here in two hours.”

She doesn’t even wait to see if we agree with her suggestion, just starts hustling him toward the nearest tent. Jaxon, in the meantime, is throwing out every kind of help me vibe and expression he can, but I just smile and wave. Maybe we should be ashamed of ourselves—it’s obvious that Erym has a gigantic crush on him—but the truth is, the panic on his face is the most emotion I’ve seen from him in days. Negotiating her hero worship without hurting her feelings will be good for him.

The others must feel the same way, because they don’t make a move to help him either. Except Macy who, when Jaxon gives us what can only be called a pleading expression, finally gives in. “I’ll go with them,” she says with a sigh. “Jaxon looks like he needs all the help he can get.

“That’s the whole point,” Mekhi tells her with a grin, but she just rolls her eyes and heads after them, shouting for the lovebirds to “hold on.”

The rest of us divide up, too. Flint goes with Luca (of course), while Eden and Mekhi wander off to look at a display of giant weapons in a nearby tent. Which leaves Hudson and me.

“Shall we go find this Soli Tree?” he asks, brows raised, when I just kind of stand on the grass staring at him for long seconds instead of following the others.

My stomach flips a little at the British in his voice—I’ve learned that the heavier his accent, the more he’s feeling, even if his blue eyes don’t show any of it—and I have to clear my throat before answering, “Yeah, let’s go.”

For a second, I think Hudson is going to say something else, but in the end he just nods and starts off in the direction Erym had given us. He doesn’t move to release my hand and ~~neither~~ ~~nor~~ do I, so I have no choice but keep up with him. He’s leading and I don’t mind following this time as it gives me a chance to take in all the sights and sounds and smells spilling from ~~the different tent~~ ~~each tent~~ without having to pay attention to where we’re going.

I know we’re in the middle of a forest, but something about this place reminds me of the boardwalk back at home on Saturday afternoons. People in whatever clothes they feel comfortable in spilling out of stores loaded down with food and packages, laughing and talking and having a great time. It’s colorful and beautiful and so fun that for a second—just a second—a jolt of homesickness rocks me to my core.

~~But then a little girl runs by in a flower crown, laughing as her parents chase after her, and the sadness passes as suddenly as it came.~~

~~I start looking inside all the tents and am I was~~ so enthralled by ~~a tentone~~ filled with beautiful leather belts and purses that I ~~didn't don't~~ even realize Hudson ~~hasd~~ stopped walking until I ~~ruan~~ right into him, ~~his arms reaching. His hand go~~ around my waist to keep me from stumbling. ~~He's grinning down at me now as he grins down at me.~~ "Hey ~~you~~."

I blink. "Hey." Honestly, I'm ~~a little~~ surprised I ~~got that managed to get that~~ word out, my body is trembling so hard, pressed up against his, my gaze drowning in his ~~unfathomable-oceanic~~ blue one.

He raises one brow ~~as if to ask what's up, then and~~ adds "We're here."

"Oh!" I push out of his arms ~~as embarrassment swamps me and I glance around, and my eyes dart around,~~ looking everywhere but at him. He just ~~chuckles-laughes a little~~ and presses a hand to the small of my back as he guides me to a giant redwood on the outskirts of the market, a huge wooden sign hanging from a branch that proudly proclaims: SOLI TREE.

## Chapter 55

Hudson and I exchange a look as we push open the door and walk into a massive space. Over half the tree is a jewelry store filled with huge glassed cases with rows and rows of all different kinds of jewelry. Rings, bracelets, earrings, and yes, even cuffs.

The other half of the space is taken up by various giants working at tables, magical kilns running around the edges of the room. My heart is pounding at the thought that the Blacksmith's wife might be one of the giant's working at a table right now.

"These are beautiful," I tell the girl behind the first counter as I pause to investigate a display case of rings in human sizes.

"Thank you!" she answers, and though she's a few years older than Erym—and probably even me—her smile is just as open and friendly. "I have fun making them."

"I would too," I tell her as I linger over one that's a flat silver band with delicate symbols etched all the way around. Something about the symbols feels like ~~they're~~ it's calling to me, and I have to fight the urge to beg to try it on. "They're amazingg."

Hudson is walking the aisles too, but he's more focused on the cases in the back with large bracelets and wrist cuffs. Most are too small to be made by the same Blacksmith we're seeking, but they're certainly a good direction to start. "These are really cool," he tells the jeweler, whose nametag identifies her as Olya. "Who makes these?"

"One of the women in town," Olya answers. "She's super talented and can do the most amazing things with any metal she touches."

"Really?" He appears fascinated with a large cuff bracelet, symbols almost dancing around its edges, and my breath catches. The way the runes are etched looks very similar to the ones on the cuff around the Beast's ankle. "Does she take commissions?"

"I don't think so," Olya's face clouds over for a couple of brief seconds. "She doesn't like to deal with people very much—especially strangers. She's been very sad since losing her husband, and we're all just a bit protective of her."

"Are you sure?" Hudson asks, and he's doing an incredible job of pretending to be fascinated with that bracelet. "Because this is—"

**Commented [ep26]:** Describe it better ☺ I don't want three pages of booths, begging. But I wouldn't mind one sentence that makes me visualize a lot of bustling people in a crowded market.

**Commented [ep27]:** Feel free to describe better ☺

He breaks off as I grab his hand and press gently in an effort to get him to back off a little. Olya has started to look uncomfortable and we don't want to raise any red flags that will get people to clam up, or worse, tell Erym's parents about our agenda, which is growing more obvious by the second agenda.

~~At first, Hudson just looks startled—like he can't believe I'm voluntarily touching him—~~  
~~but he~~ Hudson must get the message, because he stops pushing at her about the jewelry maker and instead comments on the ring I'd been admiring near the front of the shop.

**Commented [TDE28]:** I don't think this fits anymore.  
 She's voluntarily touched him like three times already

Olya's smile comes back right away as she regales him with the names of all the different runes etched into the silver. Satisfied that Hudson isn't going to push too hard, I start to pull my hand from his, but instead he threads our fingers more tightly together and that stolen moment above the tree tops a few hours ago comes rushing back, his arms wrapped around me, his face inches from mine, his voice dark and a little flirtatious as he whispered, "Gotcha."

A thousand butterflies take flight in my stomach, and I pretend to focus on the ring—and not our joined hands—oohing and aahing over it though only vaguely paying attention to the explanation about the various runes and what they mean.

"Would you like to try it on?" she eventually asks.

"Oh, I would love to," I tell her honestly. "But I don't have any money." It's not strictly true—I have a couple hundred dollars in my backpack, but that's American money. I have no idea what Giants use.

"I do," Hudson says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a gold coin with a tree stamped on it.

Olya's smile beams at the potential sale. "I've never met a vampire or a gargoyle before." She turns back to the ring. "Besides, I can already tell, the ring has chosen you."

My eyebrows shoot up, and I turn to ask Hudson what she means but he is full-on grinning at me. The little dimple in his cheek I so rarely see melts my heart, and I am powerless to resist him. I place the hand not caught in his death grip onto his chest, and my whole body melts into his with a sigh. I study his eyes, fascinated as his pupils grow so large they swallow almost ~~all of the stormy blue now only along the edges~~ almost his entire iris, so that I can only see a rim of stormy blue along the edges. His lips are moving, but the words sound like I'm under water. And that's when I realize I must have drowned in the endless depths of his oceanic eyes. It seems like a fitting way to die.

Olya pulls the case out of the display, but Hudson beats her to the punch, lifting our joined hands and slipping the ring gently on my finger as he murmurs something on a soft breath. His fingers brush against mine, sending shivers through my whole body as my breath catches in my throat.

Even Olya must sense what's passing between us because she snuffles and says, "That was beautiful."

It's just the mating bond, I tell myself as I clear my throat and try to find the breath I somehow lost. That's what's making me feel all these weird things toward Hudson. Just the mating bond.

My finger starts to itch, and I glance down as the tiny runes burn a bright orange for a second before fading back to their previous silver etchings.

My gaze searches out Hudson's again, and he says simply, "My gift to you, Grace."

Hudson bought me a ring? Why? What does this mean? My heart starts to pound in my chest as I become aware of where we are again, like waking up from a cozy nap.

Oh my God. I let Hudson buy me a ring.

He narrows his eyes on me and sighs. "You're about to make a thing about this, aren't you?"

I sputter. "Well, of course. You can't just go around buying people magical rings!"

"Well, she found her voice again." He winks at Olya. "I know, honey, what you really wanted was one of those cuffs over there." He dips his head towards the thick bracelets at the back of the store he'd been looking at before.

I want to argue but he's staring at me hard, realization dawning on me. "Yes, *honey*, you know I wanted a cuff today." I effect my best imitation of a spoiled girl pouting. "Pleeease?"

Like he's used to my tantrums, he turns pleading eyes on Olya. "If you care about my happiness at all, you will let my mate try on one of those amazing cuffs."

Olya just shakes her head, murmuring something about mates as she walks over to the display case holding the cuff at the back of the store.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

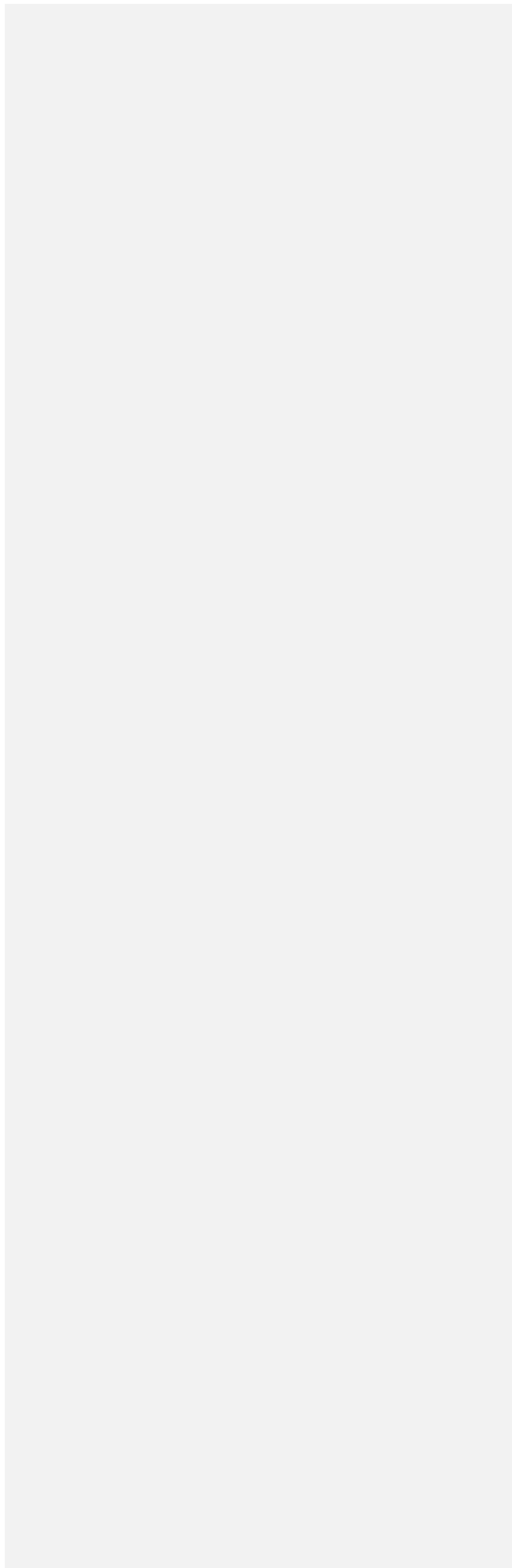
He raises one brow at me. "Trust me?"

I don't even hesitate. "Yes."

His dimple appears again, and he squeezes my hand and says in an intentionally loud voice, “Anything for you, honey.”

As we walk over to Olya, I can’t help but feel like I’ve been hit by a Mack truck with Hudson’s name stamped all over it from the second we walked into this store.

I just hope I don’t end up with tire tracks on my heart.





## Chapter 58

I have to admit, Hudson's idea was smart. After I'd tried on the cuff, he'd inspected it, turning it this way and that...until he'd find the word he'd been expecting etched inside it: FALIASOLI. If the jeweler refused to tell us more, at least we had the name of the blacksmith's wife. Surely, that was a good start.

I'd explained to the jeweler that I just didn't think this cuff was as flattering as the ring Hudson had already bought me, and she happily nodded (since, of course, she'd made the ring herself) and put the cuff back in its case.

"It's hard to compete with a Soli *promise* ring, ~~I get it," she says,~~ she says. "Believe me, I get it."

My eyes go wide—I have absolutely no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, especially with all the undercurrents suddenly flowing between Hudson and me—but I'm saved from answering when a mother and daughter come into the shop, chattering brightly.

The mother stops and stares at us, but the little girl smiles and waves. At the prospect of having a new customer, Olya seems to give in and says, "If you really want a cuff like that one, Falia Bracka made it." She then tosses out some directions to her house (today is her day off) and wishes us luck before turning to the mother and daughter inspecting a case with lockets inside.

We wave and thank Olya one more time for the ring before making our way to the door. I share a smile with Hudson as we realize we've gogot the information we came for. We're one step closer to freeing the Unkillable Beast and finding the Crown.

As we wander back to the market to meet up with our friends, I can't help wondering what's going to happen next.

Especially since Hudson is still holding my hand. The one with a *promise* ring weighing it down.

I decide as we exit the store, Hudson can call me a coward all he wants, but no way am I going to ask what I might have promised to do when he placed that magical ring on my finger. Not today, Satan. Not today.

Commented [ep29]: Please let me keep this. : )

Commented [TDE30R30]: Of course

Thankfully, he seems perfectly comfortable not bringing it up, and we spend the next hour and a half wandering around, waiting on our group. And I, at least, also spend it eating all the food. Like, all the food.

Every food vendor we pass wants us to try their food for free—guests of the royal colassor and all that—and since Hudson doesn't eat, I'm the one who has to try everything. And I mean everything.

Normally, it wouldn't be a chore—the food is delicious and I've been living on cherry Pop Tarts and granola bars a little too much lately—but the portion sizes are enormous. No matter how many times I tell them, just a little bit, I end up with at least half of what a giant would eat...at every single food booth.

Which means by the time our two hours are up, I am beyond stuffed with beef pasties, forest falafel (which tastes a lot better than its woodland name suggests), boysenberry tarts, a smoked turkey leg (only because I refused the whole turkey), a giant skewer of roasted vegetables and fruit, and one barbecued rib from what had to be the largest cow in existence.

"We have to go," I whisper to Hudson after I manage to choke down a couple of bites of the rib. "I can't eat anymore. I can't."

Hudson nods as he steers me away from the last part of the market.

The second we're out of sight, I trash the rib in the first garbage can I find. "I don't think I've ever eaten that much in my life."

"I have to admit, I'm impressed," Hudson jokes. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"That's the problem," I tease. "Everybody always underestimates me."

"A lot of people do," he says, and he sounds a lot more serious than I intended him to. "But I never have."

"What does that mean?" I ask, shooting him a weird look.

"It means I've never met anyone like you before, Grace. I think you can do anything you want to do."

It's a really big compliment, especially coming from Hudson, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that. At least until he smirks and continues, "Well, besides trying to eat an entire restaurant full of food in one day. Big fail on that one."

"You know what? I'm totally okay with failing on that one," I shoot back. "Especially since the person calling me on it basically subsists on a few glasses of blood a day."

“Are you blood shaming me now?” He gives me a mock-offended look.

I roll my eyes. “I’m pretty sure that’s not a thing.”

“It is *totally* a thing.”

“Because you say so?” I arch a brow.

“Maybe.” He narrows his eyes at me. “You got a problem with that?”

“Maybe I do. In fact—” I break off as Flint calls to me from across the square.

“Hey! There you are, New Girl.”

It’s Hudson’s turn to roll his eyes. “Dragons really do have the worst timing, don’t they?”

Mekhi, Eden, Luca, and Flint descend on us seconds later. “Oh my God,” Eden says as she takes the last sip of a giant milkshake and tosses the cup in the nearest recycle bin. “That was so good, but I am so full.”

“They got you, too, huh?” I ask sympathetically.

“They got us all,” Flint answers. “When I saw Macy a little while ago, she was more than a little green around the gills.”

“Nice people, though,” Luca says with a grin. “Everyone has been so friendly.”

Mekhi shrugs. “Yeah, but we got absolutely no info on the Blacksmith.”

“That’s because you’re all amateurs,” Hudson gloats. “His wife’s name is Falia, and she’s a jewelry maker from the Soli Tree.” He winks at me. “We also got directions to her house.”

“We’re never going to live this down, are we, Eden?” Mekhi jokes.

~~“Unlikely.” Hudson winks at me. “What can I say?” I tease. “Sometimes you got it—”~~

~~“And sometimes you don’t,” Hudson finishes.~~

~~Mekhi rolls his eyes, but~~

~~—Eden doesn’t reply. She’s too busy staring at my right hand. “She’s a jewelry maker, you say? Is that why ~~our dear Grace happens to be~~ Grace is suddenly wearing a promise ring?”~~

All eyes turn to me, and I squirm. “It’s just a ring,” I shrug. “~~I thought it was~~’s pretty.”

Flint whistles long and hard, then says, “Dude, you already got her a *promise* ring? I thought that was like a hundred-year anniversary gift or something? Da-yum.” If I wasn’t mistaken, there was actual admiration in Flint’s green eyes for the vampire he normally only vaguely tolerates on the best of days.

Not to be left out of the fun, Mekhi adds, “Holy hell. What did you promise her? You know that shit’s ~~like is~~ forever, right?”

**Commented [ep31]:** This should be a joke but nothing comes to mind.

All the guys snicker at that, Flint fist bumping Mekhi as he mentions something about Hudson being “bond whipped”. For his part, Hudson takes the ribbing good-naturedly, but his gaze darts to mine a few times, probably to gauge if I’m going to demand to know what *he* promised *me* with the magical ring. Well, he’ll have to wait for that because all I feel right now is relief that ~~I didn’t actually make it turns out I hadn’t personally made~~ some lust-blind promise to wash this guy’s sheets for an eternity.

Only Eden seems to not find the humor in the ring, one eyebrow going up as she asks me pointedly, “I sure hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Almost never,” I reply, and it’s the truth.

She chuckles but doesn’t say anything else.

After another five minutes of everyone trying to guess what Hudson promised me, Eden asks, “Do you think we should go talk to Falia now, while Macy and Jaxon are entertaining Erym?”

Luca adds, “Or do you think we should wait for them?”

“I think Jaxon will kill us if we leave him with a lovesick thirteen-year-old for much longer,” I comment.

“More reason to bail, if you ask me,” Flint says, and there’s something in his voice that has me looking at him closely, wondering if he’s really as happy as he’s seemed lately.

But his eyes are clear, the smile on his face easy, and I decide I must be mistaken.

“I’ll text him and Macy,” Mekhi says, pulling out his phone. “Let him know where we’re going and to keep Erym occupied for a little longer.”

We head west as we were instructed, and it isn’t long before the quaint, structured environmentalism of town gives way to wilderness and unstructured forest. Houses start looking more rundown and start coming further and further apart.

I’m stressing a little, afraid that *on the lake* isn’t going to be enough directions to find ~~FaliaRayka~~’s house, but once the lake comes into view, I realize it isn’t quite the problem I thought it would be.

To begin with, it’s more of a pond than a lake, so there are only two structures on the whole north edge of the lake. One is a small shed that looks like a stiff wind will knock it down. The other is house carved into and around one of the largest redwood trees I’ve ever seen.

**Commented [ep32]:** You can make this funny if you want. ☺

**Commented [TDE33R33]:** I started to and then realized it would take too long. So I’m just going to let it go.

The one I saw in town was nearly ninety feet across, with a shop carved into the first twenty feet or so of the trunk. This tree is easily that large in diameter, maybe even a little bigger. But instead of carving into the bottom of the tree, someone has built all the way around it—without carving into it at all. Considering redwoods don't have big branches like the trees that usually hold treehouses, it is one of the most amazing things I have ever seen.

There's a staircase that starts at the bottom of the tree and winds its way around and around the tree in a widely spaced diagonal pattern. I'm on the ground looking up, so I'm not really sure how high it goes, but it looks like it doesn't stop until close to one hundred fifty feet up the trunk. But the staircase isn't even the most interesting—or magnificent—part of the tree.

That goes to the platforms extending over the staircase, built snug against the side of the tree in all directions, that wind their way up the trunk along with the staircase. The platforms, like the staircase, are built on all four sides of the tree, so one faces east, the next one faces north, and so on, all the way up the tree.

Whoever built the platforms didn't carve into the tree to secure them—they obviously wanted to make sure not to harm the tree in any way-- but they fit the tree so perfectly that they must be custom built. Each platform has a roof over it, and most are even screened in.

"Each room is built onto a different part of the tree," Flint says in awe, as we stand back and study it.

"I've never seen anything like it," Eden comments. "It's brilliant."

"And old," Mekhi agrees. "Who would have thought they would have had this kind of construction know how hundreds of years ago? Or been so concerned about the tree that they made so much extra work for themselves. Most people didn't even think about the earth that way back then."

I start to say something about generalizing, but then I remember who I'm talking to. People who have been alive a really long time—and who know exactly what life was like a couple hundred years ago ... or more.

"Earth magic," I remind him. "It's hard to do something to hurt the earth when you're so intimately connected to it."

"Maybe so, but something is definitely hurting that tree," Luca says. "Look at how different it looks from the ones around it. All those strips and cankers on the bark mean it's really sick."

“Not the house,” Hudson agrees. “But yeah, something is definitely making it sick.”

We look all the way up to the thin branches that adorn the top quarter of the tree. And I realize that even the treetop looks sick with the way it’s wilting forward.

“What do you think is wrong with it?” I ask as we finally get close enough to see it in the sunlight.

As we do, I’m struck by how it really was an engineering feat of incredible marvel.

The whole house—the whole property—looks like it was once well-loved and beautiful. All the bones are here, from the cheerful carvings on the staircase and room railings to the large, fenced off garden that I’m sure was a sight to see in its heyday. Even the roses, now growing wild throughout the land on this half of the pound once had a place to belong—a circular area off to the side of the tree that looks like it was overgrown a hundred years ago—maybe even more.

As I look at this place, I’m reminded of one of the versions of Sleeping Beauty my mother read to me when I was a kid. After the girl pricked her finger and fell into a sleep for a hundred years, the entire castle fell asleep with her. All of the plants continued to grow until it the castle was overrun from all sides. Everything was dusty and in ill repair, simply waiting for Aurora to wake up. Waiting for her to return and make the place whole again.

This whole parcel of land has that same feel to me. Like everything about it has been waiting so long that it has given up. Waited so long that every piece of it is slowly dying.

It’s one of the saddest things I’ve ever seen in my life.  
a tree that looks like it once used to be tall and proud, but now is on its dying breath, most of its branches thin and leafless, the top kind of hanging forward as though it were an effort to reach the sun so it gave up.

“So, how are we going to do this?” LucaI asks. ~~as we approach the house.~~ “Just knock on the door and ask if she just happens to be married to the person who made an unbreakable pair of shackles for an unkillable beast? And if so, how do we break them, please and thank you?”

“Your optimism is heartwarming,” Flint Flint tells ~~him me~~ as he gently knocks their shoulders together. gently knocks his shoulder into mine.

“Sorry. I’m just realizing that we should have figured this out before. Sorry. I guess we should have talked about this before.” I think for a minute. “If Falia is as sad as Olya says she is, I think honesty really is the best policy. ~~think honesty really is the best policy, if she’s as sad as Olya said she was.~~ She doesn’t need more drama in her life.”

“That’s fair,” Eden agrees “But

“Umm but perhaps maybe we all shouldn’t knock on the door together,” Eden suggests as we get closer. “We don’t want to scare her.”

“She’s a giant,” Mekhi retorts. “I’m pretty sure she could rip us limb from limb if she wants to.”

“Good point,” she answers. “On second thought, maybe we need Jaxon and Macy, too.”

“You know, I totally wasn’t prepared for how big these giants are,” Flint says as we start down what was once a well-structured walkway and is now just pieces of broken cement overrun by weeds. “Admittedly, Damasen is the only giant I’ve ever met before, but he’s a shrimp compared to most of these people.”

“Right?” Luca agrees. “I was prepared for them to all be seven or eight feet, but these people are huge! I met a guy today who has to be close to twenty feet.”

“No wonder they have to live out here,” Eden comments. “We think we’ve got it bad, having to hide our existence from regular people. But so many of the giants we met today can’t hide, even if they wanted to. It’s so not fair to them.”

“I hope she’s nice,” I whisper as we finally reach the stairs at the bottom of the tree. make it to the stairs leading up to the house. But before we can so much as begin to scale the three foot stairs first step—which is several feet of the ground—the very unmistakable sound of a shotgun being cocked sounds directly behind us. someone weeping drifts down the stairs right at us.

**Commented [ep34]:** Is this how we decided to start this scene?

## Chapter 59

“It sounds like her heart is breaking,” Eden whispers, and for once the very tough dragon sounds like she’s choked up.

“No,” I disagree. “It sounds like her heart is already broken. And has been for a very, very long time.”

I recognize the sound.

“Is it coming from upstairs?” Mekhi asks, as he vaults up the first step ... or tries to.

The second his foot touches it, the staircase rolls several yards up the tree.

“Umm, what just happened?” Eden asks as we all kind of look at each other.

“I have no idea,” Mekhi replies as the staircase rolls itself back down several seconds later.

Luca tries next, and it does the same thing. It just rolls itself up. Only this time, the guardrails move too. Except, it’s not the actual guardrails that move. It’s the carvings inside them—pictures of a woman and two children doing all kinds of different things.

Swimming in the pond.

Tending the roses.

Digging up stones for the jewelry.

Baking cookies.

The list goes on and on ... and the people in each of those carvings are literally scampering up the tree away from us.

“What. The. Actual. Hell?” Flint asks, and he sounds amazed.

“I don’t know,” I say, stepping up to put a hand on the tree trunk even as he stairs warily roll back down.

I’m prepared to try to tap into my earth magic to try and figure this out, but the second I touch the tree trunk, I realize I don’t have to. The tree is literally screaming on the inside.

“It’s tapped into her,” I whisper as sadness whispers through me. “It’s drowning in her emotions.”

Commented [TDE35]: Yes, I’m being dramatic. Le sigh.



“What’s wrong with her?” Eden asks, and for the first time since I met her, she sounds reticent. Like she isn’t sure she wants to know.

“She’s been missing her mate for a thousand years,” Hudson says quietly, and there’s a somberness to him that sets off all the alarm bells inside me.

Is this what I’m dooming Jaxon to now that our mating bond is broken?

Or is this what would have happened to Hudson if I hadn’t chosen him?

Either way, the thought is horrifying. Devastating. Soul crushing.

At least Jaxon’s and my bond was manufactured, I tell myself as I lift my hand from the distressed tree. At least it wasn’t real. I’m not sure how any of us would have survived this kind of agony.

“Maybe we should go,” I say, stepping away from the tree with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Go?” Flint stares at me incredulously. “This is the whole reason we’re even here.”

“I know. I just ...” Honestly, I don’t want to face what this feels like. It wasn’t that long ago that Cole broke my mating bond with Jaxon and I could barely get off the ground. I don’t want to remember what that feels like. I sure as hell don’t want to be immersed in the agony of it all.

Yes, I have Hudson now. But that only makes it all scarier. Because losing Jaxon nearly killed me. What happens if I lose the mate destiny actually picked out for me?

Just the thought has anxiety skating just under my skin and it takes every ounce of courage I have not to run away.

Just feeling the tree scream was enough to put cracks in my very fragile heart. I don’t know if I’ve got it in me to take on Falia as well.

“Hey.” Hudson puts a hand on my lower back, and wraps himself half around me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I just ...”

He looks at the tree, grim faced, and I know he knows what I’m thinking. What I’m feeling.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, pulling me closer into the shelter of his body. “I’ve got you. I promise.”

“I know,” I answer as the warmth of him seeps into me. As the heat of our connection works its way past the cold and burrows into my very bones.

I just wish I knew how long it will last. Forever, like the mating bond lore says it should? Or is that just another pipe dream that can be snatched away from me whenever someone decides to do so.

But now isn’t exactly the time for a crisis like this, so I shove the doubts back down and force a little half smile as I look up at Hudson. “I’m good.”

He doesn’t buy it—neither the words or the smile. But he gives me one more tight squeeze—almost like he’s trying to install his own confidence within me—before he lets me go.

Once he does, I realize the others are busy trying to figure out how to climb a tree that very definitely doesn’t want to be climbed.

And every time one of them attempts it, something more severe happens. Not only does the staircase roll up, but when Flint tries to climb the tree, very worn, very aged leather rolls down over the first two screened in platforms, hiding the rooms from view.

When Hudson tries, the tree drops hundreds of small pinecones on our heads.

And when I finally try, bark rolls itself off the tree in strips and wraps itself around my ankles.

Through it all, Falia continues to weep.

“What. The. Hell?” Flint exclaims again.

I’m with him, watching in astonishment as the bark unrolls itself from around me and slides back up the tree.

“I don’t think she wants to see us,” Luca says.

“But we still need to see her,” Eden says, frustration rife in her voice. She walks around the tree one hundred and eighty degrees until she gets to the area where the crying is coming from. And there, three platforms up, is a woman in a gray dress, sobbing her eyes out.

“Hey!” Eden calls, but she doesn’t get an answer.

“Excuse me?” Flint cups his hands around his mouth and joins in the shouting.

Nothing.

“We’re sorry to bother you,” I shout up. “But can we have just a minute of your time?”

Still nothing.

Eventually Luca gets tired of waiting and jumps straight up to the platform. Except the second he lands on the wood, it's like he hits a forcefield—the tree forcibly repels him back, sending him spiraling back to earth.

Even though it probably isn't necessary—vampires always land on their feet—Flint hustles and catches him. Luca grins and whispers, "My hero," just loudly enough for us to hear him.

Flint flushes a little with embarrassment, but his grin is huge.

"Well, that didn't work," Mekhi teases. "The way it slapped you back, I was sure you were going to end up doing your best impression of a vamp cannonball."

Luca laughs. "Yeah, me too."

"Now what?" I ask, because we really need to talk to Falia. And to do that we're going to have to get past this tree's amazing defense system.

Except as we circle the tree, trying to figure out how to breach its defenses, I finally realize that the crying has stopped. Right before I look up and see a tall oman in a gray sweatshirt and a long gray skirt walking slowly down the staircase.

Apparently Falia has decided to come to us.

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